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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE SITUATION IN SIERRA LEONE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1132 (1997) of 8 October 1997, by which the Council requested me to submit an initial report within 15 days of the adoption of the resolution on compliance with paragraph 1 of the resolution, in which the Council demanded that the military junta take immediate steps to relinquish power in Sierra Leone and make way for the restoration of the democratically elected Government and a return to constitutional order.

2. In my letter of 7 October 1997 to the President of the Council (S/1997/776), I provided an assessment of the current situation in Sierra Leone. I shall therefore briefly summarize in the present report developments in and relating to Sierra Leone since that time, in particular the efforts made by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Committee in pursuit of negotiations, the response of the junta, the security and humanitarian situation inside Sierra Leone and the steps taken by the United Nations and ECOWAS to cooperate in the implementation of resolution 1132 (1997).

Efforts in pursuit of negotiations

3. The ECOWAS Committee met in Abuja on 10 and 11 October 1997 to assess the current situation in Sierra Leone, discuss resolution 1132 (1997) and adopt strategies for achieving the early return to constitutional order in Sierra Leone. The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) was not invited to the meeting.

4. In the communiqué it adopted, the Committee noted with satisfaction the reiteration of support by the Security Council for the efforts of ECOWAS in resolving the crisis in Sierra Leone and the imposition of sanctions by the Council on the illegal regime, and welcomed the appointment of my Special Envoy for Sierra Leone. The Committee called upon me to use my good offices to establish urgently a contact group on Sierra Leone to facilitate the provision of technical and logistical support by the international community for ECOWAS to help it to carry out its mandate. Consultations are currently under way to respond to the request.

5. The Committee reaffirmed its willingness to resume negotiations with the junta, despite what it called the junta's continued attacks on and harassment of troops of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), and agreed to hold its next meeting at Conakry on 20 October (subsequently changed to 22 October) subject to the following conditions: (a) representatives of the regime must have the requisite mandate to negotiate; (b) the regime must negotiate in good faith and (c) the negotiations should be strictly within the ECOWAS mandate as contained in the final communiqué of the meeting of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of ECOWAS States, held at Conakry on 26 June 1997 (S/1997/499, annex).

Security situation

6. Clashes between AFRC troops and ECOMOG forces were reported to have taken place in Freetown and around Jui, 25 kilometres from Freetown, where ECOMOG troops are based and were attacked by the AFRC. The AFRC is reported to have lost one of its two helicopter gunships during the clash in Freetown, and its military headquarters was extensively damaged. Similar clashes were reported to have occurred near Bo and Kenema in the south of the country. A number of civilian casualties were reported, but they have not been independently confirmed.

7. Reports indicate that on 15 October 1997 ECOMOG planes dropped bombs near the external communications centre in Freetown that did not explode. An aerial sortie on 16 October is reported to have occurred over the television and radio facility at Leicester Peak, 10 kilometres from Freetown. The transmitter was not damaged.

8. Some 1,200 Sierra Leonean troops, including the Kenema Brigade Commander, are reported to have defected to ECOMOG. Fighting between the AFRC and Kamajors was reported in the Tongo Fields (diamond) area in the east and between AFRC troops and Revolutionary United Front (RUF) fighters over control of resources. Looting by armed men in uniform continues. Equipment and vehicles were stolen from the offices of CARE and Cause Canada. The homes of prominent individuals, including President Kabbah, the Bishop of the United Methodist Church (also a member of the Independent Mediation Committee in Freetown) and Mr. Desmond Luke, Chairman of the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace set up under the Abidjan Accord, were looted or set on fire by men in military uniform and youth gangs mobilized by the AFRC. These gangs also approached the United Nations offices but were chased off by the national staff guarding the premises.

9. Civilian life continues to be seriously disrupted. The general work stoppage is continuing. Despite the call by the AFRC for the start of the school year, teachers have continued with their strike and parents are said to be afraid to send their children to school because of the security situation and for fear that their children might be abducted. The Sierra Leone Journalists Association has refused to comply with the demands by the AFRC for the re-registration of newspapers and has issued a statement that registration would only take place when the democratically elected government had been restored.

Humanitarian situation

10. In the humanitarian sphere, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs submitted to the ECOWAS Executive Secretary on 12 October a series of recommendations on sanctions exemptions procedures and related matters. These recommendations included seven essential and life-sustaining relief categories for a priori exemption from ECOWAS sanctions: food aid, health, shelter and survival, water and sanitation, personal and community hygiene, food production, and United Nations and non-governmental organizations operational support. Other recommendations were made with regard to modalities for cross-border relief operations into Sierra Leone from neighbouring countries, the reporting of humanitarian assistance activities and the monitoring of the impact of sanctions on the civilian population in Sierra Leone. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs will continue to maintain close contacts with ECOWAS on this matter.

11. The Humanitarian Coordinator for Sierra Leone submitted the latest report on the humanitarian situation in Sierra Leone on 14 October. It was widely circulated within the United Nations and shared with the larger humanitarian community. That report, together with earlier ones, provides only a partial view of the humanitarian situation in Sierra Leone, as all United Nations staff and many international staff of non-governmental organizations remain outside the country. Nonetheless, the situation is considered to be serious and still deteriorating. The number of displaced persons registered with humanitarian organizations during the months of July and August stands at around 100,000. However, the actual number of new internally displaced persons is thought to be much higher. A polluted water supply and deteriorating sanitary conditions in one camp for internally displaced persons in Kenema district led to an outbreak of bloody diarrhoea which began in late September. Nutrition surveys have identified pockets of severe malnutrition in the rural areas and an increase in child malnutrition generally. As of 3 October, however, less than 3,000 tons of food aid were available in-country, with acute shortages reported in Bo and Makeni. There is limited access to commercial food in urban areas, owing to high prices (which have more than tripled since the coup). Health systems are near collapse. Consequently, a measles epidemic is accounting for a 30 per cent case mortality rate among children. In one district alone (Koinadugu), 3,000 cases were reported during the third week of September. The number of Sierra Leoneans who have registered as refugees in neighbouring countries has risen to over 60,000. A much larger number of people have moved temporarily to neighbouring countries, but they have not as yet sought refugee status.

Observations

12. The situation in Sierra Leone remains serious, and the attitude of the AFRC towards the efforts of the ECOWAS Committee has continued to be marked by prevarication and a seeming insistence on holding on to power. The breakdown of organized governance is taking a heavy toll on the civilian population, which has shown remarkable fortitude.

13. The serious humanitarian situation in the country poses a dilemma for the international community because the security and safety of both personnel and

humanitarian supplies cannot be assured in the country under prevailing conditions.

14. To date, it appears that the military junta has not complied with paragraph 1 of resolution 1132 (1997). I am currently awaiting the outcome of the talks due to be held at Conakry on 22 October 1997, which should indicate any change in the stance adopted by the AFRC so far. The AFRC has accepted the Committee's invitation to attend the talks on 22 October 1997.